

More than half a million Sri Lankan workers participated in Wednesday's national strike

Our reporters
16 March 2023

Over half a million public and private sector workers across Sri Lanka joined a one-day national strike on Wednesday to protest against International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures being imposed by President Wickremesinghe's government.

Workers defied anti-strike essential service orders with many joining protests in Colombo and several outlying areas, despite the efforts of the trade unions to discourage participation.

Those on strike included 200,000 teachers, nearly 100,000 health employees, including doctors and nurses, 22,000 power workers, over 10,000 Colombo Harbour workers, approximately 13,000 university non-academic staff and 6,000 university teachers, 24,000 postal workers, 8,000 Telecom employees, 3,000 railway workers, and over 20,000 private and public bank workers.

The national walkout was called by the Trade Union Coordination Centre (TUCC), a large collective of unions, including the Health Professionals' Federation (HPF) and the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), along with Trade Unions and Mass Organisations (TUMO). Most of the unions, particularly professional associations like the GMOA, have limited their demands to just one issue—the government's new Pay As You Earn (PAYE) tax on workers' salaries.

None of these unions, however, oppose IMF austerity. They insist that workers can win their demands by exerting more pressure on the government. At the same time, they are working to derail workers' struggles by tying them to the opposition parliamentary parties, such as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which support the IMF's demands.

The unions previously declared that they would organise an indefinite strike if the government failed to address their demands. Wednesday's national walkout, however, was limited to a one-day strike with future industrial action postponed until March 22.

The GMOA, after discussions with the government on Wednesday evening, declared that it had secured a "positive response" and called off a previously planned strike on Thursday morning. The "positive response," claimed by the GMOA, however, was a government "promise" to review its

new PAYE tax, six months after it secures a bailout agreement with the IMF.

Yesterday, the collective of professionals' unions, which GMOA is part of, declared that it could not accept the government's "response" and would decide on further strike action if it fails to secure a "solution" in discussions with the administration next week.

The Wickremesinghe government has made clear that there will be no concessions. As well as the new PAYE tax, it announced last year that there will be extensive privatisation of state-owned industries and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of state sector jobs. Also planned are wage cuts and higher tariffs for electricity, water, transport and other public utilities. This vicious social assault on working people comes on top of skyrocketing increases in the cost of living and failing health and education facilities.

The government is also stepping up police repression against workers and youth taking action to fight the austerity measures.

On Tuesday, the police department directed senior officers outside Colombo to dispatch surplus anti-riot equipment to the Police Field Force Headquarters in the capital. This equipment, Senior Superintendent of Police Nihal Thalduwa said, "[S]hould be available in the areas in which they are most needed." This is another warning to the working class that it must politically prepare. If the unions cannot contain the mounting opposition, the government will mobilise the police and the military to brutally attack striking workers.

Workers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters this week, voicing their anger against the Wickremesinghe government and the unions, and insisting on the necessity for a unified working-class struggle.

A petroleum worker from Kolonnawa oil distribution centre on the outskirts of Colombo criticised the petroleum trade union leaders over their collaboration with the government.

"Nothing happened on March 15. It was a usual normal day with 300 tankers dispatched," he explained. "It's been said that the government has offered some benefits to the union leaders and they've closed their mouths. Employees wanted to strike and drive away this government but the trade unions did not intervene. They are with the minister who has already said that 3,700 workers' jobs will be cut through a volunteer retirement

scheme. The employees are against this but because they don't see any other alternative, they may accept it," he said.

Pathirana, a teacher from a major school in Colombo, said: "We had confused ideas about joining the strike on March 15 because no trade union visited our school or gave any explanation. There were just public announcements on social media. Teachers' salary levels are so low that they are not affected by the new tax reforms. The unions have not explained that the tax increases and other austerity measures we're facing are for the same reason—the government's implementation of IMF dictates.

"The unions who called the strike are also demoralising workers. They have now reversed the planned strike in anticipation of negotiations with the president. The role of the trade unions has been clearly exposed. I have no dispute with your explanation that the working class must take this struggle into its own hands. That's what should happen. But for that, the understanding of the workers has to be increased a lot."

A nurse from Kandy National Hospital said that most workers could not even buy a quarter of a loaf of bread. "I previously came to work by car but can't afford to do that now. I had some sympathy with the JVP because I thought that it would do something for the people. But, after you explained their program, I understand that their policies are no different from the government and the other capitalist parties," she said.

An art teacher from Puttalam district commented: "What's the meaning of a one-day strike? The union leaders have nothing to say about how to win our rights or what their program is for this. That's why the protests have not been organised."

A Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) worker, also from Puttalam district, said that all the workers in his area participated in Wednesday's walkout. "CEB workers are now discussing a continuous strike until we achieve our demands. Workers are opposed to these intermittent strikes and strikes without the full participation of the entire workforce. I don't think a one-day general strike has any impact on the government," he explained.

He then criticised JVP trade union leader Lal Kantha, who has declared that the JVP is not ready for an indefinite strike. "Our union is affiliated to the JVP but workers need to think about what they will do if the JVP gets into power. It will also implement IMF austerity policies," he said. "I fully agree with you that we should mobilise the entire working class against the government and its IMF policies. It's necessary to build action committees in every workplace and an international alliance of action committees."

The CEB worker said that although his monthly salary was nearly 80,000 rupees (\$US233), he only had 45,000 rupees left, after deductions for loan repayments. "I have two children and so it's difficult to manage with the rising cost of living. If the CEB is privatised we will have to face even more attacks," he said.

A Colombo Harbour worker pointed out how the unions betrayed the port strike. "They told the press that they would strike for 24 hours on March 15, but that morning workers were told to report and stay inside," he said. "The PAYE tax affects port workers hard. We're already in a very difficult situation with the rising cost of living and inflation."

He said that the union leaders, after discussions with the port's chairman, had agreed to allow work on four ships and their departure, despite the opposition of workers.

"There is some JVP influence among the port workers, but I've explained to them that the JVP is a capitalist party and that all Sri Lanka's capitalist parties support IMF austerity," he continued.

"The workers must take this fight into their own hands. The SEP's campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses is very important. The workers should be organised in an internationalist socialist organisation and with a program to abolish the capitalist system," he said.

A teacher from Hikaduwa, in the island's south, said: "Teachers have to work without the necessary equipment, which is not provided by the government. Children do not have the sort of money they need to buy things and even if the family has it, the price of these items has increased two or three times.

"Many teachers have loan repayments, which are cut from their salaries. I don't have a loan, but my salary is still not enough to pay for household expenses. I think the government should be held accountable for the current situation," he said.

"I don't think that JVP will be able to solve these problems. I participated in Wednesday's strike, but it ended without any solution. All we know about what's happening is from the media, there is no direct discussion between the union and us. Our last [teachers] strike dragged on for over three months but what did we get?"



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact